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AUTHOR Gray, Dianne Elaine
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of the preschool teacher in dealing effectively with aggression in the classroom setting. First, assertiveness, aggression and hostility are differentiated and theories of aggression are reviewed. Subsequently, social, home, family, and temperamental factors influencing aggressive behavior of preschool children are discussed. In the final chapter preventive and interventive approaches to dealing with aggression in the classroom are suggested. Preventive measures suggested include the control of space and room arrangement, the control of time, and the reinforcement of altruistic and appropriate behaviors. Intervention approaches advocated include emotional release through physical activities, the controlled use of sound to direct emotional states, and dramatic play. In conclusion, four steps of teacher intervention for leading non-playing aggressive children toward participation in cooperative social play are described.
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THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN UNDERSTANDING AGGRESSION
AND DEALING WITH IT EFFECTIVELY
IN THE PRESCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

by

Dianne Elaine Gray
Nursery School Teacher
Child Development Center
Reston, Virginia

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

One of the emotions that has perplexed teachers through the ages, and particularly now as the interrelationship of the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional is better realized, is that of aggression. Joanne Hendrick (1972, p. 159) writes, "I'm not sure how you feel, but as a nursery school teacher who copes daily with aggression, I know that I am concerned about what can be done to help us cope with aggressive children in our nursery schools." The problem of how to adequately deal with aggression is further complicated by the observation of Debus (1953, p. 95) that aggression is as natural a feeling as that of friendliness and that it is indeed an inherent element of the child's adaptive growth process.

Aggression is a complex behavior, and it has been a puzzle to teachers through the ages; likewise, it continues to be a challenge. It is the purpose of this article to explore the role of the preschool teacher in dealing effectively with aggression in the classroom setting. But before approaches can be examined, the questions What, Where, and Why must be answered. The teacher must understand the complexities of the term: the definitions, the theories and explanations of origin, and the determinants. Attention will then be focused on How. In the classroom setting how can the teacher rechannel aggressive behaviors into appropriate expression? How can she/he provide maximum continued growth for each child, no matter at which point the child happens to be in the aggression continuum? What is the teacher's role as preventer . . . as intervener?

Chapter 2

BACKGROUND

Aggression manifests itself in many guises; it is a "catch all" term to include behaviors that range from wanting to be first in line to hitting another child with the intention of inflicting pain. The spectrum is broad. To provide the reader with an adequate understanding of aggression and its implications, attention will first be focused on pertinent definitions and some of the theories of origin.

Definitions

Debus (1953) indicates that there is sometimes confusion concerning the terms: assertiveness, aggression, and hostility. He makes the following distinctions:

Assertiveness is evidenced when a child zeroes in on one particular goal and is set upon attaining it. For example, he may insist upon painting with a particular brush. Because of the singleness of purpose, his actions may be self-centered or even rude, even though his intention may not be this at all.

Aggression is the common response when one's physical or psychological space is threatened. The child who "attacks another person, or by word or deed interferes with another or threatens by word or gesture to do so, or tries by force or spoken demands to direct another's activities or to possess another's things in opposition to the apparent desire of that person" (p. 95) exhibits aggressive behavior. Some feelings of aggression are very common and normal in the young child's behavior; however, for a variety of reasons, some children have more aggressive tendencies than others.

Hostility in the truest sense of the word is not often seen in young children, for their mental concentration is too transitory to harbor prolonged vindictiveness. The strong orientation towards destruction to another and the very definite elements of deliberateness and forethought characterize this emotion.

In Feshbach's (cited in Caldwell, 1977) definition of aggression, he makes a delineation between two types--hostile and instrumental. Hostile aggression is directed toward another person following a threat to the ego or the perception that another person has behaved intentionally, and instrumental aggression is aimed at the retrieval of a territory, object or right.

Theories

It is small wonder that, in an attempt to understand the complexities of aggression, many theories were formulated which speculated upon its origin.

Early psychoanalytic theorists such as Freud attributed aggressive tendencies to biological instincts that are present from the time of birth. They viewed aggression as a "personality force that needs to be diverted and restrained through socialization processes" (Fein, 1978, p. 312).

The social learning or behaviorist theory seeks external rather than internal explanations for aggression, and it maintains that the learning experiences of the child are primary determinants of his aggressive behavior (Feshbach and Feshbach, 1972). Two principal means through which the child acquires aggressive behavior are through selective reinforcement and through the observation of aggressive peer or adult models.

Still yet another theory--the frustration-aggression hypotheses--was proposed by Dollard (1939), and it simply means that when goal directed activity is blocked, frustration sets in and aggressive drive is induced.

Each theory has its inherent strengths and weaknesses. Fein (1978) concludes that while anger seems to be a universal human emotion that can be observed even in infants, social experiences determine when and how a person's anger is expressed. Feshbach and Feshbach (1972) maintain that it appears from studies (Beck and Martin, 1955, and Otis and McCandless, 1955) that the frustration-aggression hypothesis does apply to particular types of frustrating experiences, but that one cannot automatically assume that frustration necessarily increases aggressive tendencies in all children at all times.

From these major theories many other hypotheses and explanations have evolved. Charles Wolfgang (1977) has a very practical and workable hypothesis concerning aggression, and because it lays the groundwork for a major portion of this paper, it is herein described in considerable detail.

He feels that as the child gains greater autonomy and adaptability, he extends himself out into the adult world where he is occasionally restricted by a "no." Since during the early months of infancy all primary needs were immediately gratified, the young child finds it difficult to accept when the world (through his parents) asks him to begin to delay his gratification and limits are placed upon him. Initially, the response may be one of passivity, but as tension mounts and the child is further motivated to actively master the situation, he turns to physical aggression which is expressed through such means as kicking and biting. With added maturity, verbal aggression replaces the physical and "No" becomes a common

word for the 2's and 3's. Later, as vocabulary increases, as well as intellectual capacity, and with additional experience and maturation, the child is able to solve many of his/her problems through verbalization.

The above process takes about 7 years according to Wolfgang and it is by no means a steady, irreversible process. Indeed, after a child has passed through these phases, he/she will no doubt still revert back to aggressive forms of behavior at times. "The setting of limits for young children by adults is not to be considered a punitive response but a vehicle of care-giving, enabling the adult to balance a child's maturing capacities with the increased demands of an ever expanding world" (p. 6).

Some children, however, for a variety of reasons have had to maintain themselves prematurely in a "hostile" or rejecting world long before they had the intellectual or emotional capacities to deal with it. As a result, Wolfgang hypothesizes, they are the ones who will enter preschool with limited ability to play, thus unable to use their school environment productively. These non-productive children can be termed either passive or aggressive--the passive child reacting by retreating into a "general personality state, cut off cognitively and emotionally from his world and his own body," (p. 7) while the aggressive child is in a continued state of anxiety and tension, evidenced through impulsiveness and heightened motor activity.

Chapter 3

FACTORS INFLUENCING AGGRESSION

When the child enters preschool, he/she comes as an individual-- the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical make-up of each one is unique. What that child is, does, and feels have been partially shaped by the society of which that child is a member, by the home and family environment in which he/she lives, and by his/her own individual endowments. It is logical then to assume that a child's aggressive behavior is very definitely influenced by these three elements. And, while there are other modifying factors, attention will be directed toward these three significant areas: society, home, and self.

Society

Bettye Caldwell (1977) reports that in 1974, while a member of a U. S. delegation to the People's Republic of China and while spending a great deal of time observing in Chinese kindergartens, she witnessed not one incident of aggression. There was no pushing, no shoving, no kicking; nor were any verbal attacks being made among classmates. Cooperation is a highly valued trait in China where the motto, "Serve the People!" is deeply entrenched.

In the United States, while the goal of helping others is certainly commendable, it is secondary to the emphasis placed upon competition and self-advancement. These values have permeated into all phases of American life and the child is very much aware of them. Also societal values of labeling less aggressive boys as sissies and the more aggressive girls as tomboys has had an impact. Boys are expected to be more aggressive. While on the subject of sex roles and aggression, it is interesting to

note that children themselves regard males as more aggressive than women. Six year olds believe that a tiger is a masculine animal and that a rabbit is female (Kagan, 1971). Another societal impact pointed out by Toffler (1970) a decade ago is that changes in our society are occurring too briskly to be adequately assimilated by the parents, and children are certainly feeling the effect, too. And, since the book was written, the tempo of change has drastically quickened.

Home and Family

Parental and home influences are extremely significant in encouraging a child's aggressive or non-aggressive tendencies. When dealing with child rearing practices, however, it is virtually impossible to isolate parental behavior variables. In addition, "it is difficult to determine whether a particular parental method of handling a child is a cause or a result of the child's action" (Feshbach and Feshbach, 1972).

However, certain findings have been substantiated and several conclusions have been made. Children who are unwanted by their parents, for instance, are much more prone to develop hostile feelings.

The method of discipline is also an important variable. Although punishment is meted out for the purpose of inhibiting aggression, research has indicated that this is not necessarily the case; in fact, the opposite is often true. Since punishment is a source of frustration, it sometimes stimulates aggression. Of even more significance is the fact that the parent who uses physical aggression is also acting as a model for aggressive behavior. Conversely, Sears, Maccoby, & Levin (1957) discovered that a very permissive parental attitude toward aggressive behavior will probably be viewed as approval of violence, thus resulting in more

aggression. It is important, too, that parents not only discourage aggressive behavior in an appropriate manner, but that they also foster socially desirable behavior. Positive reinforcement is crucial.

Parental views differ widely in the use of television in the home and a great deal of research concerning the relationship of violence on TV to violence later enacted by the child has been done. Bandura, Ross, and Ross (cited in Feshbach and Feshbach, 1972) discovered that preschoolers who watched physical and verbal aggression directed toward a life-sized, inflated plastic doll exhibited aggressive behavior when frustrated almost double that of the control group who saw only subdued behavior by models. Their studies also indicated that preschoolers viewing television-projected film in which aggressive behavior was rewarded were much more likely to imitate the behavior than if it had been punished.

Other home influences which may have relationship to child aggressiveness are as follows: the presence of older brothers and sisters that clearly dominate, older neighborhood playmates who continually exert their bossiness, fathers or mothers who fear sissified behavior and urge aggressiveness instead, parents who are fastidiously clean-conscious or who nudge their children too quickly from one stage of development to the next (Read, 1976). Events that threaten the child's security--new baby, a geographical move, etc.--may also trigger some aggressive behavior.

The Child

And, of course, each child possesses a native temperament. The senses with which he/she perceives, the intensity of responses, the tempo of living, and the developmental patterns are all very much the child's and may influence his/her aggressive tendencies and how he/she responds to surrounding external stimuli.

Chapter 4

DEALING WITH AGGRESSION IN THE CLASSROOM

The teacher, having attained an insight into the meaning and implications of aggression, is now ready to step into the preschool classroom and focus upon the role as teacher--HOW to deal effectively with aggression . . . HOW to use time, space, and materials to best advantage for the child's sake . . . HOW to rechannel aggression into appropriate expression?

Preventive Measures

The concept of space and room arrangement is very pertinent in trying to prevent, control, and channel aggressive behavior. The facility must be large enough, and the room must be arranged so that activities do not interfere with each other. Block areas, for instance, should be far removed from cross traffic areas, and where cooperative play is expected, it is wise to have areas that can readily be expanded.

Sybil Kritchevsky (1969) recommends that each play area serve as a sponge that will absorb children into productive play. Centers should include a variety of materials that will provide for solitary, parallel, associative, and cooperative play experiences; likewise, some materials should be fluid (water, sand), others more structured (puzzles), and still others symbolic (puppets and dress-up clothing).

It is also imperative that there are sufficient quantities of toys. It is extremely frustrating to a child to try to build a house with blocks when there are not even enough to finish it.

The control of time is also crucial. The aggressive child will need large segments of the day reserved for physical activities, including outdoor play. Consideration also needs to be given to alternating still

and active times, quiet and noisy activities. An ample amount of uninterrupted play time is also a must if play is to develop to its highest level. Since transition times are difficult for the aggressive child, they should be announced well in advance so the child has time to finish the immediate task at hand and can consider transitions as a relaxing, integral part of the day. Daily routines and rituals must be flexible and yet in order, for "repetitive time sequence of events . . . makes the preschool world predictable" (Wolfgang, 1977, p. 54).

Charles Wolfgang (1977) has the following tips to keep in mind for various scheduled segments of the day: Circular tables at snack time allow the teacher better eye contact with all children. At rest time, a mat or towel will help provide boundaries for the child, and if the teacher is nearby and the child allows it, gentle rubbing of the head or back can prove soothing. Whether the child is expected to sleep or merely rest, the horizontal position allows the child to more fully relax. A transitional activity when coming in from the playground, if only a short chat on the school steps, helps give the child time to decelerate his/her activities.

The human dimension also plays a significant role. Caldwell (1977) stresses the importance of the teacher promoting cooperation among classroom members, reinforcing altruistic behaviors as they occur in the classroom. Lurleen Anderson (1978) recommends that the teacher catch the child being good, and that she comment about it. For instance, "I know it was difficult for you to wait your turn, and I'm pleased that you could do it" (p. 13). Hendrick (1972) strongly supports the idea of spending a few minutes each day with the aggressive child before he/she does anything. And, of course, a calm, warm, understanding teacher is imperative!

Intervention Approaches

No matter what preventive measures are taken, however, some aggressive behaviors are sure to occur. What should the teacher do? Authorities in the field have many suggestions. Some of them are quite general and are good "rules of thumb" to follow in most all circumstances. Others are more specific and will work in certain situations, with certain children, at certain times. It is the judgement of the teacher that is crucial and her understanding of children in general and her specific knowledge of the particular child in question. A look will first be taken at specific outlets for the release of tension and aggression. A comprehensive approach for dealing with children who are more seriously aggressive will then be examined.

Joanne Hendrick (1972) feels that there are several physical activities through which the child can find release. She cites such things as jumping on an old mattress or jumping off boxes, trike riding, climbing, and sliding. She praises the swing, for it serves a double purpose: the child can find the back and forth action very soothing and, for the time being, it separates the child from the object of aggression. She suggests throwing bean bags at a solid wall (area needs to be defined) and strongly recommends having a large quantity of them available. She feels that punching bags are often helpful, but that children sometimes have trouble establishing the proper rhythm. Hammering and sawing activities can be most beneficial; careful supervision is needed though. Finger painting and tearing and crumpling big amounts of paper are also therapeutic, and dough and clay are excellent possibilities--again, large quantities are needed.

Hendrick (1972) also emphasizes the importance of noise in relieving tensions. Noisy activities can quickly mushroom, however, so these

approaches need to be used with teacher discretion. Drums, as well as other rhythm instruments, are fantastic outlets.

The soothing effect of water can certainly not be overlooked, for the feel of it is particularly relaxing. Water can be added to the house-keeping center for washing dishes, cleaning the table, or washing doll clothes. It can also be used in the water table with water accessories or directed through hoses. Children also delight in using big, old paint brushes to paint with water.

Opportunities for dramatic play are numerous and can be exceptionally therapeutic. Direct participation by dressing up and assuming roles will let children work through many troubling situations. At times children reenact personal traumatic experiences, and at such times the child usually places him/herself in a strategic and powerful role from which he/she is able to control the entire situation. It is important that the teacher observe these play situations; she can make key discoveries toward helping her/him better understand the child. It is crucial, however, that not too much be read into these situations nor that conclusions are made too quickly.

Large rubber animals lend themselves quite well to aggressive play, as do doll houses and rubber dolls. And, of course, puppets, flannel boards, and teacher selected books dealing with various anxiety subjects can be great relievers of tension, too.

Charles Wolfgang (1977) gives a great deal of consideration to those children who are genuinely termed aggressive and thus need an exceptional amount of teacher help and understanding in the process of becoming productive players. These are the children who initially cannot play with fluid materials such as water without becoming too excited and emotionally

flooded; they literally end up splashing the water "all over the place." These are the children who for the same reason cannot engage in social dramatic play and therefore, unless helped, would have difficulty adapting to the game of life.

This strategy, devised by Wolfgang, can be used in working with aggressive, nonplayers or it can be used in working with the productive player who simply has a "bad" day: it is as flexible as the teacher will allow it to be. The crucial element is in knowing where the child is in his "play" development. The teacher can then determine at which step to intervene and how far she needs to go.

According to Wolfgang (1977), the first step involves helping the aggressive nonplayer develop a growing awareness of self. At this stage, Wolfgang encourages use of the mirroring technique--the teacher and the child stand in front of a mirror (or the child sits on the teacher's lap if he/ she is able to accept contact with the teacher's body) and play games involving body and facial imitation. Through these activities the child can become aware of his/her own separate physical presence, and can also become cognizant of the fact that he/she can be the cause of another's actions. The child also begins to develop control of the body and to acquire an acceptance of the teacher on the basic body level.

As the child shows progress in step one, he/she can gradually be moved to a variety of experiences with more fluid materials, such as sand and water. Some children will adapt well to the transition and others will need a lot of intervening. Finger painting, for instance, may have to evolve in the following manner: first the child placing his/her hands on the teacher's while she/he paints . . . then painting with a pencil . . . then with one finger . . . then with the hands. The objective is expression with control.

In step three, the teacher will need to help the child gain ability to symbolize in the microsphere (the world of miniature life toys). There will probably be much aggressive play at this point. The teacher will allow as much of this as possible, but will need to indicate "You're getting out of control. I will help you" (p. 40), or the teacher can give the child alternatives: "Your monster can be a good monster," or "You can be the boss."

Finally, in the fourth step, the child can be steered into social dramatic play. Initially it is easier if the beginning player is teamed up with two star players from the class. The teacher will probably need to help the players "tool up" (pick our roles, put on props, etc.). As unobtrusively as possible she/he will help the beginning player stay in his/her role by providing additional props and even by modeling statements. From this point the teacher will gradually ease out.

The goal of the teacher through this whole intervention process is the following: through using the structure of object and the structure of her/his own voice, to have the child turn internal aggression to the external world of toys. Once into toys, the teacher can elaborate the action into dramatic play, and if she/he can help the child obtain verbal and body mastery through play, he/she can become a cooperative, productive class member and individual.

Wolfgang also indicated how a teacher might become increasingly involved when an aggressive act is initiated and begins to mushroom. Her/his first gesture might be one of physically moving closer and looking in the direction of the aggressor. If this is ignored, a nondirective statement such as "You are really angry," might be offered. If this is to no avail, the teacher's behavior would become more structured and

a direct question might be asked: "Do you need my help to keep you safe?" Should the child continue in the act, a verbal direction would be given (telling the child exactly what to do rather than what not to do). Finally, if no other approach worked, physical help or modeling would follow.

In summary, a philosophy of intervention has been examined and varied approaches explored. Because the spectrum of aggressive behaviors is so broad and because interacting human beings are so unpredictable, there are no simple answers. It is up to the individual teacher to make a wise decision.

CONCLUSION

A unique blend of spontaneity, honesty, and imagination imbued with a variety of feelings that range from contagious joy to outright aggression--the young child. The teacher's role in effectively dealing with just one aspect of this young child's personality, the aggressive dimension, is overwhelming.

It involves a huge commitment on the part of the teacher: an understanding of aggression and all of its implications . . . a knowledge of children in general . . . a deep insight into each specific child . . . an appreciation of the interrelatedness of play to all growth processes and the wide range of rechanneling play activities . . . a commitment to prevention and necessary intervention . . . a warm, caring attitude . . . an investment of time. Yet, the teacher's role, after all, is to provide the environment--physical, emotional, social and intellectual--that will allow each child to optimally develop in all areas. And as the teacher carries out this role there is the inherent reward of knowing that one has helped each child more fully develop toward his/her total potential. And, for the dedicated teacher, that is motivation in its purest form!

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